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BATESVILLE CASKET WEB SITE AIMS TO EDUCATE CONSUMERS ABOUT FUNERAL SERVICES AND PRODUCTS

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BATESVILLE, Ind., June 25 /PRNewswire/ -- Continuing its commitment to supporting the funeral service industry, Batesville Casket Company, the leading manufacturer of protective metal and hardwood burial caskets, has launched the industry's first major site on the World Wide Web at <http://www.batesville.com>.

Designed by marketing communications firm Hensley Segal Rentschler, the Web site aims to educate consumers on funeral services and products. The site also defines and reinforces the vital role funeral directors play in the funeral planning process. Site visitors can access in-depth information on funeral planning, products and services, and browse through a complete Grief Resource Center featuring a reference library of materials.

"This is a big step for the entire industry," said Batesville president and CEO David J. Hirt. "Thanks to the World Wide Web, we can place helpful information on funeral planning and grief management at the fingertips of literally millions of people. The Web site carefully walks consumers through the various steps of planning, whether at-need or pre-need, and explains the important role that funeral directors play in this planning process."

Richard A. Segal Jr., managing director of Hensley Segal Rentschler, said the site demonstrates how any corporation in any industry can tap the resources of the World Wide Web. "The World Wide Web is custom-made for the type of targeted information Batesville has to offer," said Segal. "No other medium has the capability of communicating Batesville's wide range of services and specific selling propositions."

The Web site is divided into various sections designed to help consumers with the difficult decisions associated with the loss of a loved one. The "Decisions To Make When A Death Occurs" section helps consumers make informed decisions about funerals and associated purchases. It is an excellent resource for families touched by immediate death, or for those pre-planning a funeral. The "Funeral Products and Services" section is filled with details and facts about Batesville's many funeral products and services. The "Family Grief Assistance Center" section includes Batesville's extensive reference library of materials to help individuals and families through the trauma of death. This section offers many tips, including comforting words and helpful assistance for someone who has experienced a loss of a loved one.

Two other Web site sections offer additional Batesville related information. One section, called "What's New," will be updated regularly and will review information new to Batesville as well as the entire funeral industry. Investors and people interested in business will find the "Company Profile" section helpful. It includes information regarding Batesville Casket Company and its holding company, Hillenbrand Industries (NYSE: HB).

The World Wide Web is quickly becoming the medium of choice for learning more about products, services and issues of importance to millions of people. In a recent survey, Nielsen Research estimated that more than 24 million Americans regularly "surf" the Web and that number grows by the thousands each week.

Batesville Casket Company, located in Batesville, Indiana, is the leading manufacturer of protective metal and hardwood burial caskets. The company is also a leading provider of cremation urns, caskets and related support services. Batesville Casket serves licensed funeral directors operating licensed funeral homes in North America and selected export markets.

Batesville's holding company, Hillenbrand Industries, Inc., is a publicly traded company for five diversified, wholly owned and autonomously managed operating companies. The five subsidiaries include Batesville Casket Company, The Forethought Group, Hill-Rom Company, Block Medical and Medeco Security Locks.

Hensley Segal Rentschler, a full-service marketing communications firm, was named Advertising Age's Business Marketing "Agency of the Year" in 1995 in part for "foresight and innovation in the new media revolution." They have developed World Wide Web sites and other interactive technologies for corporations including GE Aircraft Engines, Pall Corporation, Steed Hammond Paul Architects, Cincom Systems, Intrepid Systems and LeBlond Makino. Other clients include Apple Computer, AK Steel, Ghent Manufacturing, LCA-Vision Inc. and Quantum Chemical Company (a Hanson Company).

For more information on Hensley Segal Rentschler, visit its World Wide Web site at <http://www.hsr.com>, or call 513-671-3811.

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(HB)

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John F. Kennedy Jr. and Carolyn Bessette Kennedy Memorialized by PLAN4ever.com
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NEW YORK - July 20, 1999, Jul 20, 1999 (BUSINESS WIRE via COMTEX) -- The outpouring of grief over the deaths of John F. Kennedy Jr., Carolyn Bessette Kennedy and Lauren Bessette is palpable. As people from all over the world look for a forum to express their thoughts and emotions in the wake of the tragedy, PLAN4ever.com has established a virtual memorial for Kennedy and the Bessettes. The memorial contains an obituary and a guestbook in which mourners can leave messages of condolence. It is a free service provided by PLAN4ever.com for people to share their grief and to help express their sympathies for the families of the departed.

Online since July 18, the John F. Kennedy, Jr. memorial has been visited by people from around the world who are grieving the loss of an American icon. To get to the memorial, go to <http://www.PLAN4ever.com> and click on the banner link from the home page or enter Kennedy in the Virtual Garden search engine.

PLAN4ever.com is a funeral planning web-site based in Los Angeles offering comprehensive pre-planning, memorialization, and condolence services. Some of the products and services available through PLAN4ever.com include books on coping with death, urns, online legal documents, sympathy cards, flowers, donation services, and a mortuary finder search engine.

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New Web Site Can Save Consumers Thousands on Funerals

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RICHMOND, Va., March 3 /PRNewswire/ -- While many Web sites offer help with taxes, few have dealt with death -- the other of life's certainties -- until now.

Starting this week, consumers can arrange a loved one's funeral via the Internet, thanks to Eulogy International, a Virginia-based firm specializing in helping people cut the high cost of dying.

At www.funeralprices.com, Eulogy allows comparisons by regions of the country of the major cost components of a funeral. Consumers can then opt to retain Eulogy to handle funeral arrangements anywhere in the country and in several international locales.

"Basically we're giving people information on the wide pricing variances among funeral providers," said Eulogy president Lance Yost. "Hardly anyone has the time or inclination to comparison shop when faced with the death of a loved one."

"There are many options to be considered regarding funeral expenses," Yost explained, "everything from caskets and hearses to flowers and guest registers, and some of those items are marked up unconscionably."

"But by bringing the sometimes extreme range in prices to the public's attention, which we are doing through our new Web site," Yost said, "we believe the facts will speak for themselves and people will see how it's possible to save a great deal on funerals."

A nearly two-year-old firm, Eulogy advises consumers in their negotiations with funeral services providers.

"The result has been significant savings in every case we've worked with," said Yost, noting that the company's program is stimulating a great deal of interest as people hear about it.

"The reason for the demand," Yost stated, "stems from the reality that funeral industry pricing is increasing three times faster than the cost of living. Also, large conglomerates are buying up formerly family-run funeral homes and cemeteries at an unprecedented rate. But instead of leading to lower costs, as in other industries, consolidation results in substantial price increases. Markups of 300 percent or more for caskets, for example, are not uncommon."

Eulogy's services cover individuals; and the company offers special group protection through its Ministry Support Program for churches and through its corporate benefit plan.

Visit Eulogy International on the World Wide Web at www.eulogyintl.com or www.funeralprices.com.

SOURCE Eulogy International

NOTE TO EDITORS: Interviews and feature development also can be

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coordinated through the contacts below.

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Web site: <http://www.eulogyintl.com>
Web site: <http://www.funeralprices.com>

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Technology is helping once-staid funeral parlors cope with newly demanding customers and competition that threatens to bury them

There were times when activity around the donation table at Armstrong Funeral Home became so hectic that secretary Marion Caperchione couldn't keep up. During funerals, it was Caperchione's job to sit at a big desk in a special room and collect money for designated charities. She would take donations, deposit them in an envelope, and fill out index cards with donors' names, addresses, and the amounts of their contributions.

But on busy days--and there are lots of them at this \$1.6-million funeral home in Port Colborne, Ontario--donations flooded in faster than Caperchione could process them. With the crowd at her desk sometimes 10 deep, Caperchione would become frazzled. She'd forget to ask for the money. Checks and cash would become detached from one card and reattached to another. At the end of the day, Caperchione might spend an hour tallying the numbers on the cards and the payments received, only to discover that the two didn't jibe. Occasionally the discrepancy could be as much as \$20, and the company would have to make up the difference.

Funeral-home owner Bruce Armstrong figured that Caperchione needed help, and he supplied it in the form of a Macintosh computer. When donations came in, Caperchione would still stuff them into an envelope, but instead of relying on cards, she would enter the information in a Microsoft Works 3.0 spreadsheet. The software automatically kept a running total of donations that Caperchione could check against the money in her envelope during downtimes. Entering information in the computer was faster than filling out cards by hand, and it cut down on the time Caperchione spent doing math at the end of the day.

The new system worked for Armstrong and for Caperchione. Their customers, however, didn't like it. Over the course of eight months, at least eight people criticized the box, complaining that it imposed a businesslike, impersonal aura on what was, for them, a highly personal act. Even the new accuracy ensured by the spreadsheet didn't win Armstrong any points. After one funeral, the father of the deceased complained that a friend's name had been left off the list of donors. Armstrong explained that he tracked every penny on the computer. "If they made a donation, they're on my list," he said. "It's all computerized."

But the man was adamant. Surely there must be a problem with the process, he argued. "Yes," agreed Armstrong, who'd reached his boiling point, "I think your friend lied." He then unplugged the computer and lugged it back into his office, where it stayed.

Armstrong's experience highlights a dilemma that funeral directors have faced for nearly a decade: how do you introduce technology into the business while maintaining the warm, caring human presence that customers expect? The tools that other companies use to streamline operations and improve service can backfire in the "death-care" industry, where a strategically placed box of tissues can mean more than a state-of-the-art ordering system. Yet technology is increasingly important to competition, and competing is something many funeral-home owners are having to do for

the first time.

The funeral industry has operated, for the most part, in an economic vacuum. Recessions don't affect the death rate, nor do they greatly influence how much people spend to send off their loved ones. The failure rate for funeral homes is just 1%, the lowest for any industry. In addition, up until the 1970s, nearly 100% of funeral homes were independently owned, usually by families who'd been in the business since the days when furniture makers opened up their homes to the bereaved after selling them a casket.

But that calm, protected world is growing fragile. The change started in the early 1960s, when investigative reporter Jessica Mitford wrote *The American Way of Death*, revealing some of the industry's dirtiest practices--from inflating casket prices to lying about the benefits of embalming. The book kicked off more than a decade of hearings, resulting in a Federal Trade Commission order that funeral directors adopt realistic pricing structures, provide itemized price lists, and analyze costs, among other measures.

The regulatory crackdown was quickly followed by the rise of more demanding customers. As aging baby boomers began to arrange their parents' funerals and plan for their own, they imposed new desires on the staid industry. For one thing, many liked the cost-effectiveness and ecological soundness of cremation (the rate of cremation jumped from 3.5% in 1960 to 20% in 1993). But they also wanted more options--to be able to personalize the ceremony, making it "more of a celebration of the life that was lived," as one funeral director put it.

Then, in the late 1980s, Wall Street started paying attention. Funeral homes became an attractive investment as statistics demonstrated that the absolute number of deaths in North America would nearly double by 2040. Today, five big corporations, including the Loewen Group and Service Corp. International, own nearly 20% of the funeral homes in the United States, and acquisitions are growing. These big companies capitalize on the family name and personal service offered by small homes while introducing economies of scale and information technology to maximize profit margins. Typically, consolidators see a 25% operating profit margin, while independents barely squeeze out 10%, according to analyst Susan Little of Raymond James & Associates.

Such factors, taken together, exert powerful pressure on funeral directors to improve service through technology--but technology deployed as transparently as possible. That strategy is on display at the McDonough Funeral Home, which rests on four acres of land in Lowell, Mass. The 150-year-old Victorian building and the house next door where the McDonough family lives stand in elegant contrast to the run-down two-family homes that dot this tired, working-class city.

John McDonough grew up here. He spent his childhood helping his father with the business: trimming hedges, arranging flowers, and sometimes driving the big hearses (although he usually drove them only five feet--just enough to expose the section of tire covered by the skirt, so he could scrub the whitewall with an S.O.S. pad).

Since McDonough took over the business from his father in 1980, he's kept it exactly as it was when he was a child, right down to the rose-colored paint that's covered the walls since the house was built. McDonough's professional manner is as carefully maintained as the decor. Ever-conscious of the sensibilities of those in pain, he would never, for example, say "I know how you feel" to a customer. These are small points, true, but McDonough knows how much they mean to the bereaved. He's been there himself, having lost his mother to cancer when he was 22 and a two-week-old daughter (his first child) to a rare infant disease.

But while McDonough handles customers like the industry veteran that he is, his management of funeral arrangements is anything but traditional. "We have a lot of fun," he says. "Doing a funeral is like putting together a puzzle with tons of pieces."

The pieces start coming together during a bereaved family's first visit. Having wired the entire house so that he can hook up a computer almost anywhere, McDonough sits with his Macintosh PowerBook, guiding customers through 50 to 100 questions, ranging from the deceased's date of birth to what clubs he or she belonged to. As he types in the information, his assistant, Paula Clark, sits in an office, watching the answers appear in real time on her Macintosh screen. McDonough has wired the machines so that as soon as he plugs in the PowerBook, he can work off Clark's hard drive.

Clark begins creating a standard obituary, pulling in the specifics as her boss enters them. When it is finished, she sends it via modem to the local newspaper, the Lowell Sun. At the same time, the system is automatically importing the information into various required forms residing in a FileMaker Pro 3.0 database. As a result, "every necessary form--from social security to veterans benefits--has been filled out and is waiting to print seconds after the meeting," says McDonough.

When he's done collecting personal information, McDonough moves on to the funeral arrangements. He types in the family's preferred time and location, and notes that they want "Amazing Grace" played as mourners file into the service and "Danny Boy" played as they file out. While he is still talking with the family, Clark is on the phone with the church, setting everything up.

At first, McDonough was hesitant about using a computer in front of his customers, fearing a negative reaction. But it was a waste of time taking copious notes by hand and then keying them in to the program. So he tried to appear casual about it, keeping the conversation going while tapping away softly at the keyboard. Much to his surprise, customers were curious rather than upset, often leaning over to see what he was doing. In response, he began attaching a 15-inch mirror monitor to his PowerBook so that the entire family could watch as he filled in the forms. By setting the monitor on an old flower-pot stand, McDonough hoped to make everyone feel comfortable--as though they were simply watching television.

As a result of this tactic, the funeral director immediately found he was saving time and making fewer errors. Details, such as the need for extra limos, no longer got lost between the cracks. Other benefits were more anecdotal. McDonough recalls the day a man came in with his elderly mother, who had to have every question repeated to her in a very loud voice. McDonough finally solved the problem by setting up his monitor, allowing the woman to read the questions herself. Although he started out using the monitor only in limited circumstances, it is now part of all interviews.

Technology helps McDonough not only to plan funerals but also to orchestrate them. Consider one funeral taking place immediately after last Fourth of July weekend. At 9:30 this Monday morning, McDonough prints out from his omniscient database directions for the funeral-procession drivers--right down to the problem intersections. He also includes information about the venue, St. Margaret's Church, such as which entrances have stairs that could prove difficult for elderly mourners.

At 9:48 a.m., the procession, with Clark in the lead car and McDonough following, takes off for the main event. St. Margaret's Church is one of McDonough's regular destinations; had it been held somewhere less familiar, the funeral director could have checked his database to find out, for example, how long it would take to transport the casket to the church and unload it. While the family attends the service, McDonough's employees take a break ("they're, like, partyin' in the limo now," he says). But once the service ends, they snap back into their professional roles. It's time to head to the cemetery.

Three things can go wrong between the church and the grave site. The procession can get caught behind an accident or have to pull over for an emergency vehicle. The clouds can open up, soaking mourners as they emerge from their cars. Or the lead car can get lost in the graveyard's maze of

roads and never find the burial spot (or worse, go to the wrong hole in the ground).

To avoid those problems, McDonough coordinates cemetery runs the way the Secret Service orchestrates a presidential visit. Each car is equipped with a 50-watt Motorola radio, and Clark, who rides with the family, wears a 5-watt Motorola lapel and ear bud. McDonough sends extra cars out just ahead of the procession to "baby-sit" intersections; the drivers radio Clark to give her a heads-up on traffic.

On this particular morning the clouds look threatening, so Clark radios Joyce Sweeney, the receptionist at headquarters, and asks her to flip on the Weather Channel to monitor the radar map. The two keep in touch, and Clark is relieved that today, at least, they seem to be ahead of the weather. (Conditions were less favorable at a funeral several weeks before, and Clark had to call ahead to the cemetery office and have them unlock the indoor chapel.)

As the procession approaches the cemetery gate, Clark is listening through her ear bud to directions from the drivers sent out before her. Take your first left, now go right, go right again ... She ends up directly in front of the family plot and, in the words of McDonough, "the lead-car driver, once again, looks like a genius."

McDonough credits technology with allowing his funeral home to handle nearly four times the number of funerals as most businesses its size. With only three full-time employees, he does about 200 calls a year.

But automation has come at a price. After buying the customized database from a funeral director/consultant at a 1995 convention, McDonough spent three months rewriting the questions so that they'd be palatable to customers (one question asked graphically about amputations that the deceased may have had--that was one of the first he rephrased). McDonough still rewrites questions, taking them out altogether if they shock or upset customers.

For the most part, though, McDonough feels that the time and money (\$25,000 over the past three years) he's invested are worth it. For one thing, he's managed to eliminate one full-time position. And as proof that someone out there is watching--and appreciating his work--he's received three phone calls this year from consolidators who want to buy his \$1-million company. "Wal-Mart's coming to town," he laughs. But for now, he's holding off until his two sons, ages 15 and 16, decide whether they want to take on the family business.

If Walmart is coming to Hollywood, Fla., then Mark Panciera wants to steal its thunder. To do that, the funeral director is using traditional technology to fuel a not-so-traditional concept: a funeral retail store, or what Panciera calls the "funeral-depot" idea.

Panciera's brainchild, Alternative Funeral and Cremation Care, is located in a 4,000-square-foot building that formerly housed a golf shop, billiard store, and psychic's lair. Panciera bought the run-down structure about a year ago, hoping to turn it into a one-stop "death-care center" for people planning funerals. The building now includes his retail store and a monument dealer that is operated by other people. The building's location, adjacent to one of the longest-established graveyards in the county, "makes it the perfect place for the death-care corner," says Panciera.

In addition to the retail store, which sells everything from personalized quilts and wind chimes to burial vaults and caskets, Panciera owns three funeral homes. All four locations are connected--using the remote-communications software PC Anywhere from Symantec Inc.--to a central file server that runs a customized database built in 1985 with a program called DataFlex.

That was the year Panciera began helping his father automate what was then the family's only location. He initially spent about a month plugging historical customer information into the database, getting regular staff to assume his duties while he worked on it during the day. He also invested some \$2,500 in hiring temporary staff to spell him during the graveyard

shift. Since then he has updated the database as needed.

As a result, when Panciera bought the company from his father, in 1993, the database contained information on every family the business had served over the past 30 years. That data is invaluable in many situations, such as when a customer calls to say her grandmother has just died and she'd like the same service her grandfather had 10 years ago, only she can't remember the name of the priest, the type of flowers, or whether the casket was cherry or pine. Not only can Panciera look up that information while the customer is on the phone, but having it handy also reduces the time he and his staff spend asking routine questions for things like the death certificate.

So far Panciera has relegated technology to the background of his business, but he doesn't plan to keep it there for long. The funeral director, who quotes Wal-Mart statistics in nearly every sentence, is already preparing for what he calls the "retailization" of his industry. (An MBA, he is also fond of terms like "funeralization" and "memorialization.") Within the next year, he plans to introduce self-service kiosks at the store, which also serves as a funeral home in some cases.

Here's how Panciera expects the new, tech-enhanced sales process to work. Customers seeking to arrange a funeral will be led to a kiosk by an employee, who will guide them through a series of questions: Would you prefer cremation? If the answer is yes, would you like to hold a viewing first? What type of urn would you prefer? At the end of the session, a subtotal will appear on-screen. Customers can then add or drop services depending on their budgets. After printing out their final selections together with a price list, customers can punch in their credit-card numbers or run their cards through a reader.

That approach may sound radical, but Panciera is not one to make wild guesses about what people want. A careful marketer, he closely tracks his customers' tastes using public relations consultants, database-marketing houses, and his own database. That approach has apparently worked: the entrepreneur has a dominant presence in South Broward County.

While Panciera recognizes that what looks like "cold, hard order-taking" may turn some people off, he believes that limiting the kiosks to the retail store should mitigate his customers' distaste. Plus, he figures, anyone who has chosen to go "funeral shopping" is already pretty open-minded. "The store attracts a population that tends to be funeral averse, and one that craves immediacy and choice," he says.

Armstrong's latest technology strategy is even less traditional than Panciera's kiosk plan. Even after his donation computer proved to be a washout, the funeral director kept looking for a way to use information technology to give customers more choices and to generate additional revenue. And this time he would be careful to balance high tech with high touch.

Armstrong, a onetime car and clothing salesman who chain-smokes the Canadian version of Marlboros, joined his brother's funeral business as a director in 1983 and bought it in 1987. Having observed that large numbers of people were moving in and out of the tiny town of Port Colborne, it occurred to him that emigrants might want some way to keep in touch, spiritually speaking, with their dearly departed left behind in the cemetery there. Knowing that the Internet automatically makes all things global, he had an inspiration: why not create a cemetery on the Web?

So Armstrong taught himself HTML and, over the course of two weeks in 1995, created The Cemetery Gate. For \$50--Visa and MasterCard accepted--a customer can purchase a "plot" on the site, complete with links. One woman interred both her parents and hyperlinked them together for eternity (or, as it says in the agreement, for as long as Armstrong maintains the site).

The plots are merely photos accompanied by text, but Armstrong envisions the day when he can hold on-line wakes, complete with live video feeds from the chapel. He's sold 50 so far, and his customers seem to like

them. One woman, who had recently moved from Toronto to the United States, was depressed that her office mates lived too far away to attend her mother's funeral. So when they gathered around her desk to offer condolences, she brought up her mom's picture on the virtual cemetery site. "It was like having them at the funeral," she wrote to Armstrong via E-mail.

Armstrong has had little trouble selling the on-line plots--when he actually takes the time to make the pitch, that is. And he says many of his clients are grateful when he distracts them with his virtual-cemetery presentation (which is usually made on the day of a funeral, between the time the family has paid its respects and the arrival of the general public). Taking customers to an office and showing them the Web site actually entertains them, he says. "If you can give them something to do during this tense waiting period, they're relieved."

Initially, Armstrong found it difficult to generate enthusiasm among members of his staff, who were a little squeamish at the prospect of selling plots on the Web site. But they have warmed up to it now that they realize it brings not only real comfort but also real revenue--and publicity. "We even got asked to do a TV show because of the site," says Armstrong. The documentary, on Canada's Discovery Channel, aired several months ago. "Everyone was thrilled to see our little town of Port Colborne all over the country," says Armstrong. Someday he hopes the Web will make his business known all over the world.

Sarah Schafer is a staff writer at Inc. Technology.

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